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Keystone Life Orientation (LO) teachers: implications for educational, social, and cultural contexts

Jace Pillay

Department of Educational Psychology, University of Johannesburg, South Africa
jacep@uj.ac.za

The aim of this study was to identify and describe skills, characteristics and support networks needed by keystone Life Orientation (LO) teachers in six Gauteng schools. In this study “keystone” refers to LO teachers who make a positive impact in their schools. A qualitative research design was used to collect data through interviews, class observations, and questionnaires. Data were analysed through content analysis. The results indicate that keystone LO teachers must be skilled counselors, career guides and diverse role players. They should also be open, approachable, have integrity, be trustworthy, resolve conflict and make good use of internal and external support within the context of schools. More importantly, it was found that keystone LO teachers are determined by their ability to deal with challenges, such as child abuse, substance abuse, poverty, and HIV/AIDS within their school communities. Based on the findings, the implications for keystone LO teachers in the educational, social and cultural contexts are discussed.

Keywords: bio-ecological systems theory; cultural context; educational context; keystone; life orientation; social context

Introduction

According to the Department of Education (2002c) Life Orientation is mandatory for all learners in the Senior and Further Education and Training phases of Basic Education. It offers possibilities for equipping learners in South Africa with the knowledge, skills, attitudes and values to develop confidence within themselves and to become responsible citizens. LO can be described as a learning area within the educational context that promotes the holistic development of a child (Cornbleth, 1990; Donald, Lazarus & Lolwana, 2001; Engelbrecht & Green, 2001; Engelbrecht, Green, Naicker & Engelbrecht, 2001). *Educational context* refers, here, to all the processes, at school level, entailed in training children’s “minds and abilities so that they could acquire knowledge and develop skills” to succeed in life (Oxford South African Secondary School Dictionary, 2011: 195). LO integrates subjects, such as Health Education, Life Skills, Career Guidance, Physical Education, Human Rights Education and Religious Education (DoE, 2001).

One may argue that LO teachers require specific knowledge, skills, values and attitudes if they are to make positive contributions in their schools. As such, my point of departure is that LO teachers should be keystone teachers in schools. The concept ‘*keystone*’ is borrowed from research in Biology where the term ‘keystone species’ refers to a species that positively affects many other organisms in an ecosystem (Payton, Fenner & Lee, 2002). Another point of departure is that the many social issues in the country warrant the need for highly trained and specialized LO teachers, especially when they are expected to contribute to the holistic

development of learners. According to Donald et al. (2002:10), social issues range from the “disadvantages of social context and how these affect learning and development, to social and interpersonal problems”, such as unsafe sex, unemployment, violence, divorce, teenage suicide and substance abuse (Gysbers & Henderson, 2002; World Health Organization, 1999). *Social context* “covers all aspects of the position a person occupies in the social system as a whole” (Donald et al., 2002:3). A position defined by “physical place, relationships, power, access to resources and values” (Donald et al., 2002:4). South Africa is no exception to social issues, as noted in the study by Van der Riet and Knoetze (2004), who found poverty, child abuse, violence, HIV/AIDS, lack of access to services, family breakdown, loss of caregivers and unsafe environments to be common problems experienced by many people. Looking at these, some writers, such as Vesely, Wyatt, Oman, Aspy, Kegler, Rodine, Marshall & Mcleary (2004) perceive LO as the answer to the management of such problems. However, one may argue that it is not just the LO learning area that is needed to make a difference within schools, but is also the skills and characteristics of LO teachers that are crucial.

Skills and personal characteristics of LO teachers

Berns (2007: 256) notes that “the best teachers are interesting, competent, caring, encouraging and flexible, yet have demanding standards”. Also they motivate students to learn and reinforce their efforts (Van Deventer, 2009). As expected, subject knowledge is a necessary component for teachers to be successful in their teaching (Palmer, Stough, Burdenski & Gonzales, 2005: 14). Subject knowledge and experience are important factors to consider with regard to LO teachers, but could become a problem if they are not trained to teach LO (Khulisa Management Services, 2000). This was confirmed by Rooth (2005) who found that 30% of all teachers in her national study were not specifically trained in teaching LO.

Research has found that teaching in multicultural classrooms is often difficult (Ting-Toomey, 1999; Tlhabane, 2004; Wubbels, den Brok, Veldman & van Tartwijk, 2006), since teachers need to have good interpersonal competence, skills in intercultural communication and conflict management. Some writers go as far as suggesting that LO teachers should expose learners to the values endorsed in the South African constitution (Morena, 2004; Ngwenya, 2003; Kwa-Zulu Natal Department of Education, 2002a; Department of Education, 2001), while others claim that LO teachers should be role models themselves (Prinsloo, 2007; Rajezi, 2003). The important point to note is that LO teachers should be sensitive to diverse *cultural contexts*, which could be seen as “the values, understandings, norms, beliefs, and traditions of a group of people in a society” (Donald et al., 2002:24).

From the above discussion one may infer that LO teachers need to have a critical understanding of educational, social and cultural contexts, if they are to be keystone teachers in their schools. The researcher argues that keystone LO teachers need specific skills and characteristics that are essential for them to be effective and influential in their teaching of LO. Hence, the main research question explored in this study is: Which skills, characteristics and support networks do LO teachers need to be keystone teachers in schools?

Theoretical perspective of the study

From the perspective of social constructivism, an individual does not construct meaning in isolation, but through being part of a community of learning (e.g. a school) (Cottone, 2007; Prochaska & Norcross, 2007). Consequently, the success of a learning area, such as LO will be dependent on how the learners and teachers individually and collaboratively construct

meaning and knowledge about LO.

In terms of *bio-ecological systems theory*, the LO teacher should be viewed as one 'system' within many other sub-systems (Donald, Lazarus & Lolwana, 2002). Other systems include the learners, the school and the wider community. All of these systems interact and influence one another. Based upon these premises, LO teachers and learners do not construct meaning in a vacuum, but in particular bio-ecological environments that are continually interacting (Bronfenbrenner, 1987; Donald, Lazarus & Lolwana., 2002). The understanding of bio-ecological systems theory and social constructivism is relevant to this study as it highlights the interaction and interdependence of LO teachers, learners and other stakeholders in the school community.

Research methodology

Research design

A qualitative research design was used, since it was expected to provide a holistic and deeper understanding of keystone LO teachers (Merriam, 1998), what is more it is descriptive, exploratory and contextual by nature. The study describes the skills and characteristics of keystone LO teachers exploring their experiences within the context of their schools (Henning, Van Rensburg & Smit, 2004; Neuman, 1997).

Sampling

Semi-structured individual interviews were held with six LO teachers who were purposively selected from three primary and three secondary schools that were historically "white". The criteria for selection of the LO teachers were as follows: they had to be teaching LO in their schools for at least one year and they had to have some form of training as LO teachers. The schools ranged from suburban middle to higher socio-economic status. Class size ranged between 35 and 40 learners per class. Two of the LO teachers interviewed were male and the other four were female. Two of them recently qualified and were specifically trained in teaching LO. The other four had participated in training workshops on the Revised National Curriculum for LO that were organised by the Gauteng Department of Education. Data was also collected through questionnaires that were completed by all LO teachers in the six schools (36 in total) as well as through classroom observations of LO teaching by the six teachers interviewed. The questionnaire was comprised of three sections, namely, personal information, teaching, and learning of LO.

Trustworthiness

The triangulation of data collection methods and sources ensured trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Pillay & Nesengani, 2006). The researcher tried to refrain from being biased through continuous self-monitoring throughout the research process. Furthermore, the results were presented to a panel of four peer reviewers to verify the interpretation of the data.

Ethical measures

Written permission to conduct the study was obtained from the Gauteng Department of Education, principals and educators of the schools involved. The participants were informed from the start of the study that their participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any point without penalty (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). To maintain confidentiality no names of participants and schools are mentioned in the study.

Data analysis

A qualitative content analysis, as described by Henning et al., (2004), was used in the data analysis process. The researcher carefully read each interview transcript, observation journal and questionnaire, in order to form an impression of the context in which each of the teachers worked. During the coding process notes were made in the margins of the transcripts and questionnaires, thus identifying key findings (McBurney, 2001; Neuman, 1997; Pillay, 2003).

Results

The data analysis led to the identification of two main themes, namely, skills and characteristics of keystone LO teachers and their support networks. In each of these themes recurrent sub-themes emerged and are discussed here.

Skills and personal characteristics of keystone LO teachers

The data analysis revealed that LO teachers aspire to be effective counselors, effective career guides and to possess the ability to engage in several diverse roles. They also need to have certain personal characteristics and interpersonal skills as discussed here.

Counseling skills

The findings indicate that LO teachers need to have knowledge about the current social problems that learners are facing, namely, emotional, physical and sexual abuse, substance abuse, poverty, and HIV/AIDS. They also need to have the necessary skills so that they can provide counseling support for learners. It would appear that LO teachers consider emotional, physical and sexual abuse as escalating in the schools studied. This is evident in one of the teacher's responses:

"... it is shocking what is happening to our children these days. The sexual abuse is rife. I have children telling me that they were molested by family members and other learners".

This was confirmed by another teacher who said: *"I talk to children every week who have been sexually abused"*. During classroom observations it came to my attention that there were some learners who were withdrawn, lacked concentration and were, at times, easily distracted. When the teachers were questioned about these learners, some of them confirmed that such behaviours were the trend and teachers were ready to point out that many of these learners spoke to them about sexual abuse. An analysis of the questionnaires corroborated the perceived increase of reported child abuse. Some of the teachers elaborated on physical and emotional abuse. For example, one teacher noted:

"Sometimes you see scars and bruises on kids and you know ... you get the feeling that something is not right ... those cannot be because she fell down. Someone did that you know".

Another teacher shared her experiences of talking to learners who were physically assaulted:

"This child had marks on his thighs and I said what happened here. I almost teared when he described how his father beat him up with an electric cord because he was naughty."

Some of the teachers pointed out that emotional abuse was a real problem: *"no one worries about emotional abuse but these kids are torn up inside when they are mocked and teased"*.

Even though child abuse is a serious problem, the striking finding that emanates from this study is the LO teacher's difficulty in supporting learners who experience abuse, expressed by a teacher as follows: *"I cannot explain how hopeless and helpless I feel when I cannot do anything to help these children"*. Many of the teachers strongly advocated the need for LO

teachers to be trained as counselors. This was aptly captured by one of the teachers in an interview: *"I was not trained as a counselor so how am I expected to help these learners? I just wish I was trained for this"*. Another teacher stated:

"I was not even trained as a LO teacher, let alone to be a school counselor. Everything I do is through my own learning. I don't know when I am doing the right or wrong thing".

This was confirmed through the questionnaires that the teachers completed where many of them noted their lack of counseling skills. Essentially, the participants were pointing out that to be keystone LO teachers, they must be effective counselors to assist the many learners who experience a range of abuse. This confirms some of the findings mentioned in the literature review (Pillay, 2005).

Poverty and financial challenges were mentioned in all six interviews: *"We have the kids who are just too poor"*. In the questionnaires it was frequently noted that teachers felt helpless when they worked with learners that came from poverty-stricken backgrounds. For example: *"what do you do when the learner does not concentrate because he has not eaten for days?"* During observation sessions, the poverty amongst learners was very conspicuous. There were learners with torn shoes and no jerseys even though it was in the middle of winter. Many of them wore dirty uniforms because that was probably the only ones they owned, and there was no time to wash them during the week days, since they wore them every day. Some teachers went out of their way to assist learners: *"I give them soap to wash themselves"*, another female teacher said: *"you know those young girls need to take care of themselves. I give them sanitary pads that I buy with my own money"*. Whilst some of the teachers gave explicit examples of how they supported learners, there were those teachers who felt that it was not their responsibility to do so: *"I don't think it is fair that I should use the peanuts that I get paid to support learners. Government must do something"*. Another teacher noted in the questionnaire: *"you know we will burn out if we try to do everything. I am not prepared to do that. I have children too"*.

An interesting observation was that the LO teachers who were prepared to go the extra mile were actually the ones who were trained as LO teachers, or they gathered a wealth of experience over the years as LO teachers. From the questionnaires it was evident that those teachers who did not qualify as LO teachers, but ended up as such, did not appear as willing to help their learners. In the case of the latter, it was either that they became LO teachers so that they could have a full teaching load, or they initially used LO teaching time to complete their administration work. The salient point about the poverty factor was the need for LO teachers to be able to counsel learners on how to stay clean, refrain from crime and make ends meet as difficult as it was:

"We need to advise learners that even if you are poor you can be clean. You can find honest means to make a living like washing cars instead of stealing or robbing people".

This was supported by another teacher who emphasized the need for advising learners through life skills: *"Yes we can teach them life skills such as decision-making and conflict resolution to help them face their problems"*.

The escalation of HIV/AIDS was identified as a significant social challenge in virtually all of the interviews and questionnaires, an example states:

"HIV/ AIDS are not something that we only read in the newspaper — we have the reality of it: either children being infected or affected".

It would appear that HIV/AIDS is a problem in all of the schools that participated in the study. The belief that this is mainly a problem in poor schools and communities is fast becoming a

fallacy as is evident in the words of a LO teacher in a former model C school:

"You will be shocked to know that we have about twenty or so orphans in our school. This is so because their parents have died of AIDS".

Another teacher highlighted the associated problem of child-headed families:

"It is so sad that we have so many learners from child-headed families in this school. Their parents are no longer here because of AIDS".

Life Orientation teachers find themselves in a difficult position because teachers from other learning areas seem to depend on them for guidance and advice in terms of supporting learners who are either infected or affected by HIV/AIDS. So the argument is that to be a keystone LO teacher, one has to be trained to work with learners and communities that experience the devastating effects of HIV/AIDS.

Several other social problems were identified in the study by the LO teachers, namely: teenage pregnancy, substance abuse, divorce, and bullying. From the findings it would appear that LO teachers are expected to be trained to counsel learners on the identified social problems. The underlying assumption is that all the social problems are most likely to affect learners, schools and local communities. This is aligned to a bio-ecological systems way of thinking, which postulates that what affects learners in one system is likely to impact on the other systems they are exposed to.

Career guidance skills

The findings indicate the necessity for LO teachers to possess effective career guidance, for instance: "They should be knowledgeable about resources and career information as finding a job is increasingly becoming a challenge for many school leavers". In the light of all the social problems mentioned earlier, it is quite easy for learners to drop out of school. As such, it is pertinent for LO teachers to motivate learners by stimulating their career aspirations, as noted by one of the teachers: *"With everything else failing in their lives, it would be appropriate to encourage learners to have positive career aspirations"*. The researcher supports this view based on previous studies, which found that learners from disadvantaged contexts were able to overcome their adverse environmental conditions by clinging to their hopes of a good future and by focusing on doing well in their school work. This, they believed, would take them out of their negative circumstances (Lethale, 2008; Pillay, 1996; Pillay & Nesengani, 2006). The argument is that keystone LO teachers should be equipped to provide career guidance to learners. What is more, they should motivate learners to work towards positive aspirations in life.

Skills to fulfil diverse roles

It was mentioned in all of the interviews that LO teachers fulfil diverse roles. Firstly, the interviewees all agreed that the primary responsibility of the LO teacher is to teach and successfully implement the LO learning programme. In addition, a recurring theme was that the LO teacher should take a proactive step in creating a healthy school environment that extends beyond the classroom. For example, one participant stated that LO teachers play a pivotal role in *"promoting human rights and inclusive education within a school"*. Virtually all the participants in the study articulated the importance of the role that LO teachers should play in the promotion of diverse cultures. This was evident in a teacher interview:

"Many times I find that I have to mediate between different cultural groups. Sometimes there is tension and I have to find ways of diffusing it".

This was supported by some of the responses in the questionnaire: *“We have a role to play in creating a multicultural environment in our schools”*; *“Our learners must learn to respect different cultures”*; and *“My role is to create cultural tolerance”*.

The terms ‘pastoral role’ and ‘fatherly role’ were used in two of the interviews. Other words used to describe the LO teacher’s role include social worker, teacher, and communicator. The broadness of the LO teacher’s role is reflected in the following statement *“[An LO teacher] is never limited to teaching a subject”*. Another teacher commented that *“You’ve got to be everything... you cannot just be the teacher”*. It was apparent from the interviews that teachers face many additional demands at school, above and beyond teaching *per se*. These additional demands interfere with the teacher’s ability to provide sufficient support to the learners, and, due to time, constraints prevent teachers from enrolling for further training. One teacher commented: *“Who is going to go on the training? We have so many demands of, you know, everything else”*. It appears that teachers would like more training, but do not know when they will find the time to complete this training. One teacher said LO is

“to help [learners] to develop skills to prepare them for the diverse challenges life might hold for them, not only for when they are grown up, but also now”.

Personal characteristics of life orientation teachers

As noted in the literature review, best teachers are interesting, competent, caring, encouraging, flexible and still have demanding standards (Berns, 2007:256). One would expect that LO teachers will be no different, especially in the light of their varied roles that have already been discussed. Literature emphasizes that *“the character of the LO teacher is of the utmost importance”* and should be displayed with integrity (Prinsloo, 2007:168). The word ‘integrity’ refers to the quality of possessing and steadfastly adhering to high moral principles or professional standards. Four of the teachers interviewed stated that LO teachers should be open and approachable so that learners would feel comfortable to confide in them. One of them said that these characteristics are important so that the learners who come to her: *“often confide ... what their problems are”*. The ability to maintain confidentiality is often characterized by trustworthiness. Also they should be warm, caring and supportive of learners. One teacher emphasized that a LO teacher should be a role model of the values and morals depicted in the South African Constitution so that learners could learn by example (Rajczi, 2003). However, the role of the LO teacher cannot be viewed in isolation from the support of other stakeholders.

Support networks of Life Orientation teachers

The findings indicate that keystone LO teachers are able to establish and maintain both internal and external support networks.

Internal support networks

Effective LO teachers are able to collaborate with other colleagues as part of a team that is concerned with the welfare of learners and the school as a whole. They do not claim to have all the answers but depend on the knowledge and insight of their colleagues in order to best support learners. This is echoed in the words of one of the teachers: *“Cooperation with colleagues is very important if there is to be a positive impact on learners”*. Another teacher corroborated this by stating that *“we as staff members support each other and discuss learners with each other to determine what would be the best plan of action to help them”*. Collaboration with parents is also critical for *“parent and family intervention to follow”*. Effective

LO teachers have no problems with involving parents, in fact they go out of their way to include them at all levels of intervention. They also strive to establish strong internal support bases by ensuring that the different subsystems within the school context work together, for example the school management team (SMT), school governing body (SGB) and the school-based support team (SBST) working collaboratively to manage substance abuse at the school. The LO teacher does not entirely depend on external support but tries to mobilize support within the school to address pertinent issues. One teacher remarked:

"We get promises from people that say they are going to send people that are going to come and help but they never come. So we depend on ourselves and what we have in the school to get things going for the children".

The LO teachers identified principals, heads of grades and assessment teams, school psychologists and other professionals as important role-players within the school context.

External support networks

There is a variety of external support networks that should be available to teachers, with one teacher mentioning the District Office, Department of Social Services, Department of Health and the South African Police Service. However, three of the teachers stressed that their schools are not receiving enough support from external networks and that promises to provide support to the schools are seldom realized. For example, when one school was experiencing a drug problem the teacher said:

"You will have the SAPS saying 'we will come and have a drug bust'. But they never come. You know they just don't come... but we never have anything ... so that doesn't help".

This teacher went on to say that

"we have the SANCA [The South African National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence] organisation that helps with drug rehabilitation".

One LO teacher stated that she would be grateful for support from universities:

"They are supposed to help us with training and counselling...and we desperately need their kind of help, because they know what they are doing, they are well equipped and they will be able to really meet the children in a better way".

The degree of support that is available — both internally and externally — can maximize the effectiveness of a keystone LO teacher, by increasing the quantity and improving the quality of the support offered. For example, if a Non-Governmental Organization, such as NICRO could provide support for learners who are involved in substance abuse then the LO teacher could have more time to focus on other issues, such as school-based violence, poverty and HIV/AIDS.

Conclusion

Implications for keystone LO teachers in educational, social and cultural contexts

The findings of this study are significant in that they reveal several implications for what constitutes the role of keystone LO teachers in the educational, social, and cultural contexts — as corroborated in the literature and theoretical discussions covered earlier in this paper. In the educational context, keystone LO teachers should be involved in the processes that develop the minds and abilities of children to acquire the knowledge and skills to succeed in life. In order to accomplish this LO teachers, firstly, need to be effective counselors so that they could help learners with the multitude of social problems that exist in society. However, the problem is

that most LO teachers have not been trained in basic counseling skills (Diale, 2010). As such, it is imperative that the department of education should take responsibility for the in-service training of LO teachers in basic counseling skills. Simultaneously, the department should consult with tertiary institutions to ensure that basic counseling skills training is included in the pre-service education of LO teachers, especially, in light of the fact that the department rationalized the posts of school counselors.

Secondly, LO teachers should be trained to support learners with career guidance. The urgency of this need was recently evident in the stampede at the University of Johannesburg by students who wanted to gain admission into the institution's different academic programmes. Proper career guidance and planning at the school level would most probably not have led to the tragic event.

Thirdly, LO teachers should be part of the School Based Support Team (SBST) to ensure that learners are supported within the educational context (Sethosa, 2001). The core purpose of SBSTs is to foster the development of effective teaching and learning in schools, primarily through identifying and addressing barriers to learning, at all levels of the system. SBSTs could provide a forum for teachers to share teaching knowledge and skills and to express and receive collegial and emotional support (Campher, 1997, Calitz, 2000; Creese, Daniels & Norwich, 1997).

Fourthly, keystone LO teachers make good use of both internal and external resources in order to provide a favourable educational environment for learners. They work diligently in forging close links with the communities they serve, hence functioning from a bio-ecological systems perspective. Fifthly, keystone LO teachers are comfortable in taking on different roles, such as pastor and social worker, in order to meet the needs of their learners. Finally, they have certain personality characteristics, such as integrity, openness, approachability, trustworthiness, and warmth that make them caring and supportive of their learners. Their counseling, networking and conflict resolution skills also contribute to their valuable role within the educational context.

Within the social context keystone LO teachers are mindful of their position in the school system as a whole. More importantly, they are aware of the position that learners occupy within the school system. This means that they are sensitive of how physical place, relationships, power, access to resources and values define the position of learners. They also focus on the social issues that are prevalent in their schools recognizing that these issues, such as violence, teenage pregnancies and the spread of HIV/AIDS, mainly result from disadvantages that exist within social contexts and inevitably affect the learning and development of learners. Such social issues affect teachers, learners and the community at large impacting on the different subsystems as postulated by bio-ecological systems theory (Donald et al., 2002).

From a cultural context, keystone LO teachers are respectful of the diverse cultures that learners and colleagues come from. They are aware that people from different cultures may possess different values, understandings, norms, beliefs and traditions. As such, they "invite different cultural perspectives to enter into and inform every discussion, activity, task and event as well as organizational policy and practice" (Early Learning Resource Unit, 1997:10). Keystone LO teachers view all cultures as being equal and value what could be learned from different cultures and they encourage their learners to do the same.

In conclusion it should be noted that the educational, social, and cultural contexts are not mutually exclusive. In some ways they are all interrelated and interconnected as depicted in bio-ecological systems theory. For example, in the educational context social issues and cul-

tural aspects contribute to what actually happens in that context and the same could be said of the other two contexts. As such, keystone LO teachers should be viewed as 'teachers for all contexts' if they are to be of value in South Africa.

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